

Survey: Teachers, Support Staff, Faculty Demoralized

“The evaluation system has made teaching a version of the Hunger Games.”

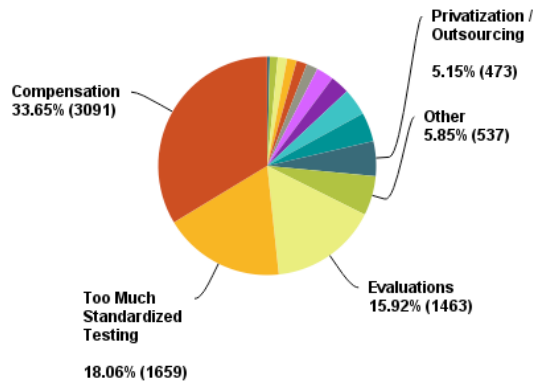
AN UNPRECEDENTED LEVEL OF RESPONSE to a joint MEA-AFT Michigan survey of our members provides a startling glimpse into the collective psyche of educators in Michigan. Forget the A-B-C’s, and go straight to D: Demoralized. Demeaned. Devalued.

That’s the current state of morale among K-12 teachers and support staff, higher education faculty and support staff, and retirees from all sectors.

The anonymous online survey was open to all members of both unions, and nearly 11,000 responded, including teachers, faculty, bus drivers, secretaries, paraeducators, food service employees, custodial and maintenance, IT/tech support and safety/security employees.

Combined they had a total of 215,765 years of experience and an average of 20 years each. Yet school employees reported feeling unappreciated, frustrated by stagnant wages, and burdened by unrealistic mandates from lawmakers who possess little or no expertise in education.

“People are burning out at an alarming rate,” one survey respondent commented. “Too much has been added to our plates that has little to do



Q: What is the #1 most concerning issue in education today?

with actual teaching.”

Another put it more bluntly: “Why are legislators with no experience or understanding of how children learn making decisions regarding their education? They ignore the teachers who are the real experts; it’s tragic.”

MEA President Steve Cook and AFT Michigan President David Hecker presented the survey results to news media last month.

“Michigan school employees have been dealt blow after blow in recent years, accepting pay cuts and freezes and other attacks from Lansing most Michiganders would find unacceptable,” Cook said in the press con-

ference. “This survey is a damning indictment of toxic education policies and a toxic attitude toward those who educate our kids.”

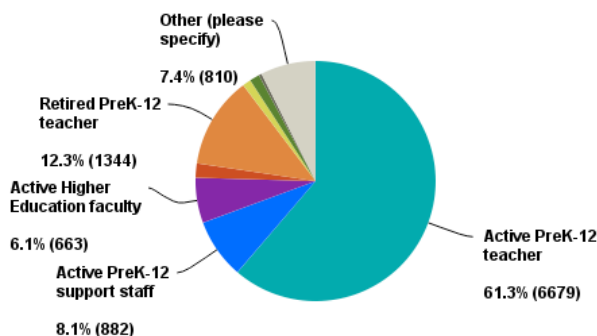
Cook and Hecker told reporters that urgent fixes are needed to repair the state’s broken school funding system—revealed in a recent state-commissioned study—and to rein in skyrocketing health care costs resulting from health care spending caps mandated in a 2011 law, PA 152.

“Ensuring adequate, equitable, stable funds for schools is essential in addressing compensation issues that threaten the ability of districts to attract and retain the best and brightest educators,” Cook said.

Indeed, survey respondents noted the conditions created by lawmakers are driving good people out of the profession, leading many to fear a crisis in education is near on the horizon.

“I would not encourage my children to go into education,” one respondent said.

Another added: “Who will teach our kids when we are gone?”



Q What is (or was) your job category?

Key Findings from the survey and MEA messages of change

WAGES, BENEFITS, COMPENSATION AND JOB SECURITY

80 percent of school employees said they are under-compensated.

Many take home several thousand dollars less per year than five years ago.

52 percent said they didn't think they could comfortably retire.

51 percent of support staff said at least one group of employees at their district/institutions have been privatized during the past five years.

43 percent of support staff said their unit accepted a concessionary contract to avoid jobs cuts in the past five years.

At districts that had recently privatized any support staff, 3 percent of school employees said it had a positive impact, while 43 percent called the impact negative or extremely negative.

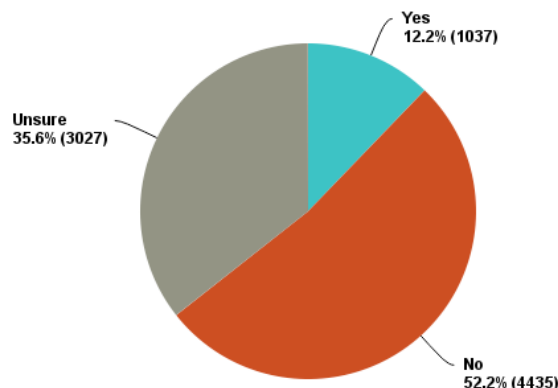
"I no longer have job security which has eliminated my ability to take risks and be creative in my classroom. I am so afraid of being fired (as are 90% of my colleagues) that I cannot risk the complications brought on by a lesson designed to teach critical thinking and putting any level of control in the hands of my students."

"I would have continued teaching for years beyond retirement time—and I am not the tired old stuck in a rut teacher the legislature seems to think seasoned teachers are—but now I am counting the days until I can retire. It is so sad to see what these legislators have done to this profession and the students we are trying to help grow and mature."

"I have never seen the morale so low among our staff. While I still love working with my students, I am dismayed by the way many of my colleagues are treated by the administration and the lack of support for teachers dealing with significant behavior disruptions."

MEA message:

- Our school funding system is broken, as noted in a recent Legislative study.
- Skyrocketing health care cost increases mandated by PA 152 of 2011 are unsustainable.
- Continued attacks on pensions, and forcing employees to pay more out-of-pocket for health care and retirement, will worsen compensation and educator retention issues.



Q: Do you feel that you'll be able to comfortably retire?

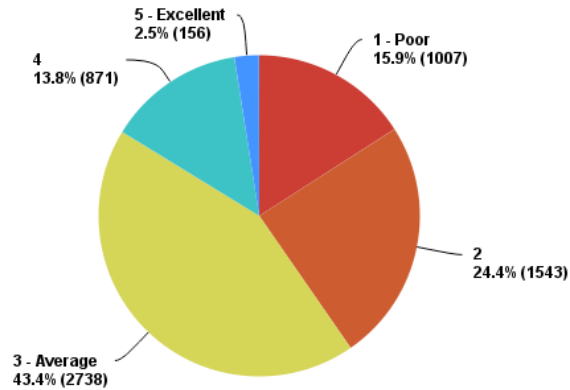
STANDARDIZED TESTING

Respondents reported their students take an average of four different standardized tests each year. Many teachers said “dozens,” and for some, the number was so high that they could only make a ballpark guess. At least 40 answered simply, “Too many.”

A dismal 16 percent said they were well-supported in implementing new state educational standards.

MEA message:

- Moving the goal posts around makes it harder for educators and students to hit them.
- Educators need quality professional development and time to adapt to changes.
- We need to bring both consistency and sanity to our standards and testing.



Q: On a scale of 1 to 5, rate the quality of support teachers have in implementing new state educational standards and curriculum?

“When I began teaching, I was able to teach CONTENT. I have given up too much of my curriculum to preparation for Standardized tests. This does NOT help prepare students for their future lives.”

“Having Kindergarten students take part in multiple standardized tests throughout the year and pushing them to read before they are ready, is not what is best for the students. These practices are not developmentally appropriate and more play based learning should be what we are fighting for.”

“There is too much focus on test scores and too little focus on the love of learning.”

“I feel bad for the younger teachers. They will probably never experience the true joy of teaching. All about scores and DATA.”

“When I was a resource room teacher my students often cried over the standardized test. They had to take the NWEA test 3 times a year as well as the state assessment.”

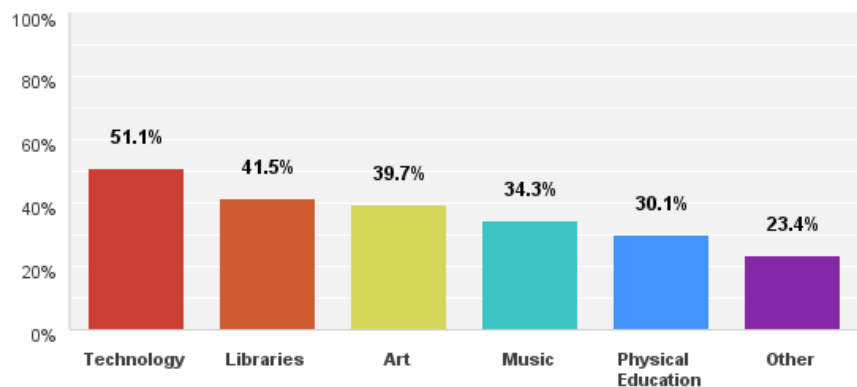
SAFETY/SCHOOL CONDITIONS

Of the poor conditions school employees reported at their buildings, the issues that were most frequently cited were:

- Unreliable heating/cooling (57 percent)
- Damaged walls/ceilings (39 percent)
- Poor air quality (34 percent)
- Rodents/insects (32 percent)

MEA message:

- Our deteriorating school infrastructure is in need of maintenance, which has been neglected because our broken school funding system does not meet basic needs.



Q: Check the following courses/facilities that your students have inadequate access to.

EVALUATIONS

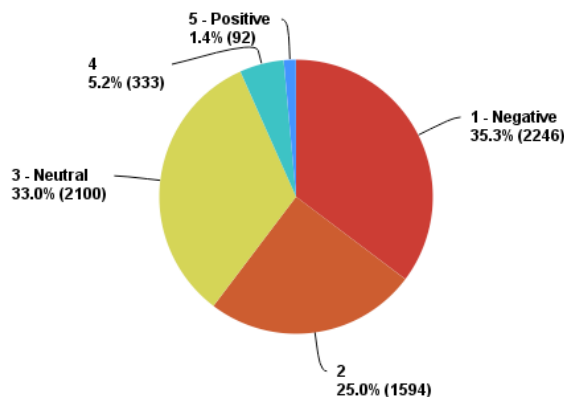
Only 7 percent of teachers thought changes to the evaluation system over the past several years have had a positive impact on their teaching. In fact, 60 percent said these changes had a negative impact on their teaching.

Subjectivity in the evaluation tools is a problem, according to the survey. Many respondents objected to being marked down for attendance even when they only took sick days that were granted for illnesses or medical emergencies.

The lack of validity in judging teachers based on test scores creates frustration and low morale.

MEA message:

- Evaluations should be about helping teachers better serve students—not pitting educators against each other.
- The ban on bargaining over evaluations should be lifted, so there is greater local control and buy-in around evaluation.
- Districts should begin taking bipartisan improvements made in the law last year and implementing them locally to refocus the conversation to improvement and excellence.



Q: On a scale of 1 to 5, have recent changes to the evaluation system had a positive or negative impact on your teaching?

“Ninety five percent of our teachers are functioning at an unbelievably high level and the evaluation system is focused on the bottom 5%. All teachers want to get rid of any and all bad teachers—but the evaluation system does a poor job of accomplishing that while at the same time DESTROYS THE PRODUCTIVITY OF THE GOOD TEACHERS!!!”

“The present evaluation system has such a negative impact on my teaching that I am physically sick each day when I report to work.”

“I feel like I am not allowed to teach and build a relationship with my students as I did in the past, now my teaching is driven by data and the fear of a bad evaluation.”

“Help us. I had tenure, and now it’s gone. I’ve seen other long-term teachers given poor evaluations and then pink slipped, even though they were excellent teachers. I live in constant fear that I’ll be next and I’m the sole support of my family.”

CONCLUSIONS

Not long after the release of our survey results last month, two separate proposals aimed at reducing financial pressures on Michigan school employees were introduced in the House.

One proposal sponsored by Rep. Peter Lucido (R-Shelby Township) would reduce health care costs for school employees, while a separate bill from Rep. Adam Zemke (D-Ann Arbor) would extend a tax credit to offset student loan debt for educa-

tors working in schools that serve at-risk populations.

Those proposals are a step in the right direction, but we can’t stop there.

Public school employees are increasingly discontented and concerned that the education system is headed for a crisis if lawmakers don’t act quickly to address our broken school funding system and enact better education policies that focus on helping students succeed.

Nearly universally, educators feel disrespected and frustrated and ignored. By cutting budgets and issuing draconian mandates that demonize public school employees and public schools, the state is destroying the quality of our children’s education.

The warning signs are out there, but policymakers have chosen to bury their heads in the sand rather than listen to experts—Michigan’s hardworking school employees. That needs to end. ■